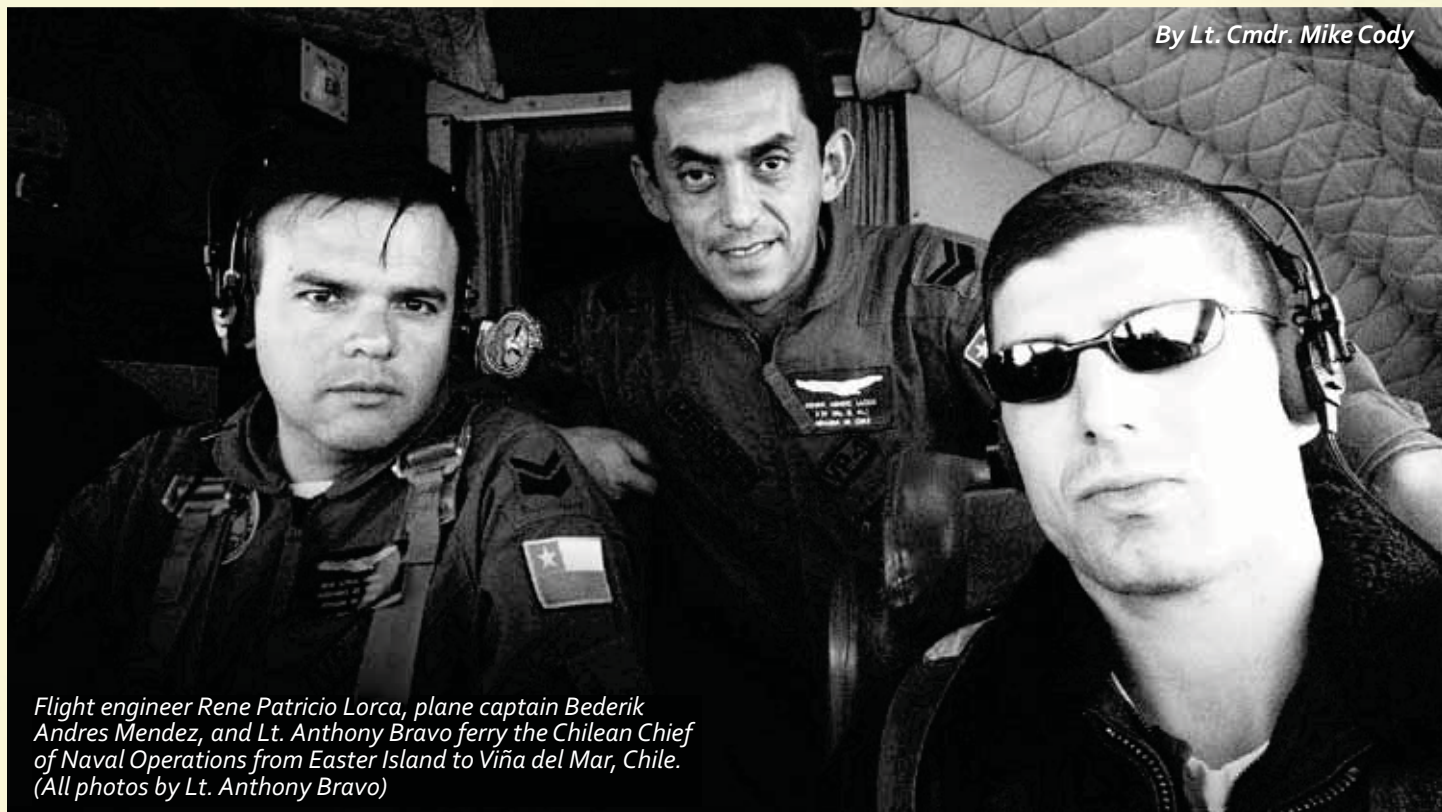


THREE YEARS IN CHILE: FORGING FRIENDSHIPS WITH A SOUTH AMERICAN NAVY

By Lt. Cmdr. Mike Cody



Flight engineer Rene Patricio Lorca, plane captain Bederik Andres Mendez, and Lt. Anthony Bravo ferry the Chilean Chief of Naval Operations from Easter Island to Viña del Mar, Chile. (All photos by Lt. Anthony Bravo)

In three years as an exchange pilot flying the P-3ACH (the Chilean model of the P-3A Orion) with the Chilean Armada, U.S. Navy Lt. Anthony Bravo may not have logged as many hours as he would have in a regular Navy assignment, but he saw and did things that many of his peers never will.

A qualified co-pilot, patrol plane commander, and mission commander in the Armada's only patrol and reconnaissance squadron, VP-1, Bravo flew in support of missions to protect Chilean sovereignty and to collect data for a NASA study on global warming.

Bravo had the honor of flying the Comandante en Jefe de la Armada de Chile (the Chilean Chief of Naval Operations) to Easter Island. Supporting other unique requirements, he also had members of the Chilean, Colombian, and Ecuadorean special forces jump from his aircraft at altitudes ranging from 8,000 to 25,000 feet.

In addition to more routine flights, Bravo also participated in a search-and-rescue operation when a Peruvian fishing vessel capsized in Chilean waters. He also helped to airlift a three-day-old girl for medical attention, and transported the body of a Chilean marine home to his family.

As Bravo wound down his tour with the Navy's Personnel Exchange Program (PEP), he looked back on the experience with pride and recommended it for others.

"I will be leaving South America with another language, experiences I could never put a price on, knowledge and appreciation of other cultures, and special, lifelong friendships," said Bravo.

The exchange program, part of the Navy's language skills, regional expertise, and cultural awareness strategy, dates back to the late 1940s and currently includes about 200 U.S. officers and enlisted members assigned around the globe. Many participants serve with traditional NATO allies as well as in South America, Korea, Africa, Eastern Europe, Asia, and the Middle East.

"The main goal, from an operational standpoint, is to improve our interoperability," said Lt. Cmdr. Greg Francioch, the PEP program manager. "Through such programs, you have a better idea of what your partners may bring to the fight."

Arriving in Chile in June 2007, Bravo discovered he had a lot to learn. The Chilean version of the Spanish language is unique and can be challenging even for experienced Spanish-speakers. To overcome the obstacles of strong accents, rapid speech, and colloquial expressions, Bravo fell back on a technique his instructors had promoted at Defense Language Institute (DLI), at Monterey, Calif.

"Since I was unable to become fluent in the Spanish language, much less many of the *Chilenismos*—a courteous



term used to describe the unique Castilian sayings of the Andean country—in the time allotted at DLI, I had to depend on body language, voice inflection, tone of speech, and facial movements,” Bravo said.

Although Chilean and U.S. P-3 operations are similar, Bravo was impressed by how carefully the Chileans cleaned the inside and outside of their aircraft, which date to the 1960s. Many of the enlisted men were members of VP-1 in the 1990s, when the Chilean Armada acquired its P-3s. Since then, their experience and hard work have kept the aircraft in impeccable condition.

Bravo was happy to share what he knew about U.S.-style P-3 operations and presented several briefings on safety hazards. He was also enthusiastic about participating in sports and social activities, learning about Chilean culture, and striking up friendships with Chileans.

Bravo joined a local church, La Iglesia Union Cristiana de Viña del Mar, and served meals to homeless people and visiting prisoners in a nearby city. For his 30th birthday in March 2009, members of the church threw him a surprise party, complete with a tradition called *malteo*, which consisted of taking Bravo to the terrace of his apartment building and lofting him up in the air 30 times.


When his concierge told him about a plan to provide Christmas presents for local children, Bravo raised enough money to buy gifts not only for the children, but for their parents. He and other U.S. military personnel in the area also bought and delivered presents to 90 underprivileged children at a school in Valparaiso.

In February 2010, a severe earthquake and tsunami struck Chile. In addition to his professional duties over the next six months, Bravo raised \$10,000 for survivors in the most devastated cities, which he donated through La Fundacion Blanca Estela, the Chilean Armada’s foundation. Donors included friends, relatives, organizations such as the Rotary Club and the Knights of Columbus, and churches in the United States and Puerto Rico.

A few weeks before returning to the United States, Bravo flew with the Chilean Armada’s only training squadron, VT-1. While waiting for another pilot, he looked at photographs of aviation school graduates and came to a surprising realization: he knew at least one person from each graduating class from the past 20 years.

The relatively small size of the Chilean Armada had something to do with that. So did an Armada tradition, in which all of the officers on a base eat lunch together daily.

“Therefore, I will not only know the P-3 leadership, but that of the Armada’s other aviation communities, for years to come,” said Bravo.

Bravo received the Antarctic Service Medal and Humanitarian Service Medal as a result of his service in Chile. He negotiated his current orders, which call for a year in Afghanistan as a liaison officer to the Afghan National Army, and discussed the follow-on set, which could give him an operational East Coast assignment. The combination would give him a chance to do his part in the war on terror and to keep him on track with his peers. 

Lt. Cmdr. Cody serves with Chief of Naval Personnel public affairs.



Sailors from VP-1, Chile's only P-3 squadron, pose in front of one of their aircraft.